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WOMEN'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:  
FRONTIERS OF A NEW PARADIGM

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## WOMEN'S ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### WHOSE DEVELOPMENT ?

In its most crass terms, development is about becoming westernized, large coca cola and cigarette advertisements dotting the landscape and sleek cars cruising the highway lined by modern airconditioned skyscrapers which hide the spreading urban slums. This development is about a highway to urbanization, industrialization, unemployment, social disintegration and environmental degradation. The material growth of a small elite at the expense of the many. In this game women and the increasing number of the worlds poor and unemployed have been largely the subjects and victims, while global corporations and governments managed by men the major architects and beneficiaries.

In this paper, we reject that deeply embedded narrow view of development as well as the tendency to focus on women as victims. The analysis acknowledges women as essential players in shaping societal wellbeing including economic and socio-cultural wellbeing and change.

In Development as presently measured,

1. A woman selling her body contributes to the national income and "development"; A woman caring for her aged mother does not. A child prostitute contributes to the national income and "development"; a child completing her schooling does not.

2. A girl child selling cigarettes at the street corner contributes to the national income; a girlchild doing volunteer service with a crisis counselling hotline does not contribute to the national income and her country's level of development.

In this monetary framework, which we presently define as development we are forced to justify women's contribution to development on the basis of a small segment of their activity confined to the so called productive sphere. They are given credit for being responsible for 80% of agricultural production in the South, for household management and primary health care as well as environmental management. The latter clearly are significant but they are not easily measurable. A case has to be made continuously for the recognition of women's essential role in "development". What this characterization does, however, is to represent women as wronged victims, holding their societies together from the margins of existence.

The reality of women's role in providing the foundation of any healthy and sustainable society and a legitimate role in co-charting the course of society is almost lost. In general, the attempt by feminists and environmentalists to justify, define and measure in monetary terms, women's work and nature within the dominant development model has led to partial recognition of the

important role that women play and the centrality of natural resources to the economy and livelihoods. However this monetarisation has done a disservice to nature, women and our quest for sustainability by obscuring the non-monetary value of nature and women's work to societal wellbeing and sustainability. Development measured and conceived in corporate economic growth terms cannot be made sustainable.

If we conceive instead of what are the essential elements of healthy societies or sustainable ways of living, we begin to get a much sharper and balanced perspective of women's role in shaping and maintaining healthy societies. We also recognise that trees, flowers, joy, laughter, vibrant creative cultures and strong communities are essential elements of healthy societies and sustainable ways of living. This becomes self evident even though they cannot be easily measured in monetary terms and do not need to be measured to be recognised as essential elements. In this world of sustainable healthy societies, women are the architects and custodians. They are presently however being pushed further and further to the margins by economistic development.

## HEALTH

Promoting healthy lifestyles as well as disease control are mutually reinforcing aspects of health in which women play a pivotal role. Women in the South remain the agents responsible for health of children, the family in general and the aged. Passing on knowledge of which foods are healthy, which are needed during seasonal changes, for cleansing and those which should be used to prevent which diseases is often a woman's domain.

The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that 80% of the world's population depend for their health care on traditional healers and on midwives during reproduction. In many societies women play significant roles as traditional healers. They also tend to be the midwives. However, official health statistics still measure the number of western trained doctors per population, most of whom are male and the number of hospital beds per population as indicators of health.

In the western health model, which is focused on disease cure rather than prevention and by which "development" is measured, women's role in health tends to be recognised mainly in the area of primary health care, which is seen as secondary to the formal medical system. This myopia of the significance of traditional medicine and women's role in that system as well as the focus on disease cure do serious disservice to the significant role of women in health care and prevention in the South and indigenous communities in the North.

## EDUCATION

Education, health, culture, production, ethics and spirituality cannot be compartmentalized. They are often not compartmentalized by peoples in the South and indigenous peoples in the North. Both in the formal and informal spheres of education, women have been predominant and play a significant role. Because in most societies they are responsible for child care they are particularly powerful in early socialisation and make up the majority of primary school teachers. In many countries of the South they are also in the majority in secondary education but they are poorly represented in the administration of all levels of education. They are particularly poorly represented in vocational education, science and technology and university education. This under representation in formal education of science and technology is one of the most significant consequences of gender inequity because women have been historically in the forefront of scientific and technological innovations in food manufacturing and garment industry and information technology. These technological innovations gave rise to the modern manufacturing and service sector and the information revolution.

The focus indicates the importance of removing sexist stereotyping in school books and socialising in the family, and gender discrimination in all aspects of education. It is now widely recognised that education of girls and women is the best investment in development, but the broader reasons and implications for that reality are neither followed through in development theory, methodology and policy nor in development education.

## ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND MANAGEMENT

The global assembly held in Miami November 1991 documented hundreds of examples of ordinary women across regions of the South who had demonstrated their sustainable management of the natural environment sometimes against the greatest odds. The knowledge women have of plants and their nutritional and medicinal uses is often taken for granted and much is being lost. Rural Jamaican women were derided by the western medical practitioners when they said that they used periwinkle for cancer and marijuana tea for glaucoma. They called aloe the plant of life. Again this was dismissed by western practitioners as old wives tales. Today these women and their societies pay dearly to buy the officially prepared derivatives of these plants now marketed by major multinational pharmaceutical and businesses. Under the new GATT agreement governing intellectual property rights, which allow patenting of genetic plant material considered in their societies as common property, some of these women might have to justify in court the use of these plants.

## ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Labour force statistics which have been used as the basis for economic policy and planning have for decades masked the true level of women's participation. This has been partly because of the definition of work as work for wages and the seasonal nature of work. Bina Agarwal, the Indian economist indicates that in India there is a growing gender awareness in gathering statistics. In their recent economic activity surveys, an analysis of a sample of women who called themselves housewives found that these women were also raising cattle.

Women have traditionally run and managed small environmentally friendly guest houses, where other women have also been employed. However many Southern countries in promoting tourism failed to learn from the model established by the women and stressed large four star and five star hotels, run by multinationals and managed by men. Indonesia found that in the five star model the women were reduced to prostitution to try to make a living, while a combination of the large and small hotels maintained women's business stake as equal and competitive partners in the tourism industry. The large hotels depending on air conditioning in hot Southern climates have been energy inefficient and have contributed to the destruction of many coastal zones with the pumping of their untreated waste into the sea. Without a stake in the society or its sustainability the large hotels have been content with making quick profits at the expense of the environment and very little flowing to the local community.

Women are also very visible in small and medium size business enterprises. However, the so called "development process" has tended to favour large scale enterprises in giving incentives and credit. Further, because laws in most countries of the South also discriminate against women in giving access to official credit, even where credit was made available, women were unlikely to be beneficiaries and often lost control of their assets to their husbands. While their access to credit is improving, their share of credit diminishes, the larger the sums borrowed.

Women whose textile, food manufacturing and service sector innovations have created the foundation for multinational production and technology have been systematically marginalised and exploited in the global corporate competition for greater profits at least cost. They are caricatured as being useful to manufacturing and industry because they are nimble fingered and docile.

## CULTURE

Women have been the keepers and transmitters of the societal myths and legends, the songs and the dances, the lessons that make for peace or hatred, for cooperation or conflict. The cultural lessons that give a people their sense of themselves, their history, their

survival "tools" and their sense of purpose are passed on by the women.

#### ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY

Their ethical and spiritual messages or absence thereof in the early period of socialization are the elements that make for a society which offers its people a quality of life which is harmonious and peaceful or conflict ridden and frenetic. Their active role and recognition in this sphere can make the difference between a society characterised by fear, inequity and violence and the society characterised by openness, mutual respect and a sense of social responsibility. Women are powerful shapers of society and the earlier we recognise their centrality and give them official voice the more likely we are to heal our sick and ailing societies, North and South.

#### TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE

There is no movement for social change that has succeeded without the full cooperation of the women working side by side with the men. The lessons of change in the North and the lessons of the struggle to overcome colonialism and slavery in the South are replete with practical examples. The way out of our present global crisis cannot be achieved without the combined vision and active collaboration of women and men. Until we see women as central to healthy societies we will continue to flounder in chaos led by the myopia of those who assume that a system can survive with partial vision.